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SUBJECT: MUSLIM IV SAYS AMERICAN ISLAM CAN TEACH MUSLIM

RECONCILIATION

¶11. SUMMARY. The American experience subtly changes Islam for the better by erasing many of the schisms that plague Muslims elsewhere, according to returning International Visitor and Islamic Council member Bayano Valy. Leading a roundtable discussion at PAS based on his recent participation in the IVLP, "Islamic Leadership," he argued that the American Muslims offer a model of Islamic reconciliation under one roof, whether divisions are theological or ethnic. Valy's remarks and the subsequent PAS-hosted Iftar received significant press coverage, including by the local Muslim radio station. Hats off again to ECA/PE/V for producing a timely, well-organized program. END SUMMARY

¶12. On October 11, PAS hosted a roundtable discussion on Islam in the United States, led by Bayano Valy, a journalist and researcher who also serves as press officer for the Islamic Council of Mozambique. Valy participated in the recent International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) "Islamic Leadership," and used the roundtable to present his impressions. He spoke to an invited audience of about 25 Muslims and journalists.

NO MUSLIM UNDERCLASS

¶13. Valy opened by dispelling the common impression that Muslims form an underclass in the U.S. He listed figures to the contrary, citing high income and educational levels. In fact, Iranian-Americans are among the most successful immigrants in American history. Taken together, he averred, Muslims represent perhaps the fastest growing religious group in the U.S., now outnumbering Jews and many individual Christian denominations.

E PLURIBUS UNUM, SORT OF

¶14. What struck Valy most, however, was not American Islam's size, growth, or affluence; it was its relative lack of internal discord. The sectarian and ethnic schisms that plague Islam in the Middle East and Africa simply don't exist in the U.S. Typically, American mosques encompass many ethnicities and both major sects without distinguishing one from the other. He noted that the practice of treating all Muslims equally reflects the original Islam of Mecca before the Sunnis-Shia split emerged. American Islam, thus, presents Muslims around the world a model of unity and internal reconciliation. In this context, he told Muslims to stop thinking of America either as a mission field or simply beyond the holy pale, and to begin to see that American Islam has something important to offer traditionally Muslim societies.

AMERICANS IN NEED OF A RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

¶15. How did American Muslims get to this point? Largely by the fact that many are immigrants, suggested Valy, and their subsequent economic success. As with most immigrant groups, Muslims immigrants have tended to assimilate as they and their offspring become more culturally American. The challenge of the American mosque, Valy noted, lies in maintaining an Islamic community, particularly among youth. It must accentuate what believers share, rather than their differences. Moreover, American converts, including African American Muslims, simply don't care about Old World divisions. As a result, American Muslims of all backgrounds tend to see themselves as Muslims, not Sunnis or Shias.

¶16. He was careful to point out, however, that there is no such thing as a Muslim community per se in the U.S., but rather that it is a hodgepodge of ethnic and linguistic communities ranging from immigrant groups to the Nation of Islam. Overall, Muslims remain a minority in a predominantly Christian culture. Minority status encourages unity, the notion of One Islam under One Roof helping to define a community in an alien context.

Educate the Imams

¶17. Prompted by audience comments about the low level of education among Mozambican Muslims, Valy called for more and better education in general. American Muslims, he said, succeed in part because of their education, both practical and liberal. One explanation for the unity of American Islam lies in its well-educated leadership. Unlike Mozambican imams, their education is not limited to theology. Valy said he met American imams with doctorates in political science and other social sciences, and most

hold undergraduate degrees.

18. Average American Muslims also have access to education and thus appreciate to some degree the need to maintain the intellectual underpinnings of the faith. By contrast, it is the lack of education for Mozambican Muslims that stands as their greatest obstacle; until 1990 there was not a single Islamic school in the heavily Muslim north. He concluded that it is precisely their ignorance that makes Mozambican Muslims ripe for manipulation by an ill-educated clergy.

EDUCATION AND WORK FOR WOMEN IS A NECESSITY

19. Valy challenged the commonly held notion that Islam discourages women from work. Even in Saudi Arabia, he averred, women work within the home. The question is not whether women will work, it is rather what kind of work they will do. Educate women, and the country and Islam will move forward. Leave them ignorant, and they will hold back the community and the country.

SEPTEMBER 11

110. Valy called September 11 a short-term problem for American Muslims, but a long-term blessing in disguise. The fear that followed the attacks led to numerous incidents of discrimination and even violence against Muslims. Yet it was these incidents that forced non-Muslim Americans to recognize the Muslims in their midst, and that they too were fellow Americans. September 11, therefore, had the paradoxical result of transforming terrorists' hatred of things American into a deeper American understanding and acceptance of Islam.

PRESS COVERAGE

111. Radio Imame, a Maputo radio station for the Islamic community with an audience of about 15,000, recorded and later aired extended segments of the discussion, noting also the PAS-hosted Iftar that followed. Radio Capital, a Christian station with about 25,000 listeners, aired a story using recorded segments of the session. O País, an influential independent weekly with a print run of 20,000, also published a story on October 14.

A BROADER SPECTRUM OF IVLP PARTICIPANTS WOULD BE BETTER

112. In a separate debriefing, Valy made one criticism of the IVLP. The other participants were either imams or were perceived as religious leaders in their countries. He felt alone in his more journalistic and in many ways secular approach to the program. He suggested inclusion of Muslims with broader backgrounds (such as journalism) for balance in such future programs.

113. COMMENT. Valy spoke not as a religious leader, but as a Muslim journalist. He carefully sidestepped theological questions, choosing to focus on American Muslims politically, socially, and economically. By painting a picture of a sophisticated American Islam, he has contributed to the Mozambican Muslim community's overall reassessment of the United States, assisted by our highly visible outreach program.

LA LIME